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In CIA's Defense

Richard Helms, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was persuasive in his defense of the CIA the other day against the generalized charges that it is an "invisible government." Obviously, he operates under a great handicap, in that the demands of secrecy preclude him from explaining the agency's work fully and candidly.

Most Americans, we suspect, want to believe him when he says that the CIA makes no foreign policy or that the CIA does not "target on American citizens." But any agency spending so much money as the CIA, dealing in espionage as well as more routine intelligence gathering, and shrouding its work in great secrecy, is bound to raise suspicions. Mr. Helms told the American Society of Newspaper Editors that the nation "to a degree must take it on faith that we, too, are honorable men devoted to her service." There is little question that he and his colleagues feel under attack when the tendencies or the potentialities of the agency are criticized.

Still, a secret intelligence agency, controlling a huge bureaucracy, could be subverted to tyrannical purposes by a government that was so minded. That is the fear inspired among lovers of individual freedom when the exigencies of international conflicts impinge on their lives. The CIA is monitored, in a general way, by the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board and by members of some subcommittees on defense and appropriations in the Congress. Even though the public has no way of knowing how much is revealed to those senators and congressmen, there has been no serious proposal that the CIA be abolished or that its activities be broadly publicized.

Proposals have been made from time to time that the agency's activities be supervised by a joint congressional committee similar to the one that covers

the Atomic Energy Commission. Such a committee would be useful directly and perhaps even more in giving citizens generally the assurance that the CIA is not operating on its own, with little direction or control.

Basically, the best protection of American citizens against any agency that would usurp the functions of normal governmental bodies is a sharp defense of constitutional freedoms by the courts. Government cannot function entirely in the open when it comes to national defense in an age of nuclear giants. Tyranny cannot flourish so long as men are protected against bureaucratic steamrollers and executive fiat by a court system that is sensitive to the erosion of freedom. Meanwhile, it is encouraging to hear the CIA director disown any attempts at making high policy or at diverting the foreign focus of the agency's attention.

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